



32nd Week of Ordinary Time and the Feast of St Hilda of Whitby – 12/17 November 2023

Reflection: Mgr Daniel McHugh

***“Wisdom .... is found in those who look for her”*** (Wisdom 6:12)

This coming week one of the Memorials at Mass that stands out for me is St Hilda of Whitby. Not long ago on a short break in Yorkshire I visited Whitby: the famous Abbey ruins stand out on the headland, and even if you're just passing by you can't miss the impressive sight. This time I stopped, went to see around the ruins and visited the local town: all very worthwhile if you're in that part of the world. Very interesting for us in the light of the continuing Synod in Rome and one of the subjects gaining media attention – the role of women in the Church. Yes Hilda, an Abbess who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, hosted a Synod, and was one of the most influential figures in the Church of her day. A 13<sup>th</sup> Century seal shows Abbess Hilda holding her Crozier, with monks on either side celebrating the Mass. I am not claiming she was concelebrating, but she headed up a dual monastery where there were both monks and nuns. Under her tutelage were no less than 5 Bishops including John of Beverley and Wilfred who become patron of Cotton College, Staffordshire, the former Diocesan minor seminary. Hilda and her monastic rule became so respected, St Bede says, that even Kings and Princes sought her advice. She certainly played a role in the affairs of her time, notably in the Synod of Whitby, the meeting called to resolve the date of Easter, which was celebrated at different times by Celtic and Roman Christians.

In the light of the media debate about the present Synod in Rome and the role of women in the Church in particular, it is a Feast that should not just pass us by. In fact, once you begin to look into the history of the Church at home and abroad you come to see very clearly the important role women have played and continue to play in the life of the Church. One of those I was fortunate to meet and who has taken a leading and controversial role in the media was Mother Angelica, the founder of the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN). If you follow televised services from the Vatican EWTN is frequently involved in covering ceremonies and the Papal Journeys too. Mother Angelica's Community is based in the Diocese of Birmingham, Alabama, in the USA. The Bishop there was keen to build links with Birmingham, England. When I visited her Television Studios I came away impressed by the way she had gathered the support of lay people across the States in her evangelising mission – prayer and small donations and a holy woman built EWTN. Where the US Bishops had failed to create a National Network, she succeeded in creating an International one.

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We priests know how important women of Faith are in parishes: their key role in the family in bringing up children in Faith and Prayer; their key role in Church both in terms of the upkeep of our places of prayer, and in leading prayer and catechesis; and in outreach to those in need. So, the concern of the Holy Father to give recognition to the role of women in Church structures is to be welcomed.

Speaking with one of the Columban Fathers recently about his experience on the Missions, we focused on change taking place in Deaneries at the moment in the light of shortage of priests. It was interesting to hear his experience of a more lay-led (women too!) Church at local level: in terms of prayer and catechesis and with the priest visiting the Church at longer intervals, between even celebration of Mass on Sundays. He thought this could be a model for the future! The involvement of young leaders – not only the elderly and retired – in the ongoing life of the Church seemed to us another lesson to be borne in mind from experience abroad.

This led me to think further about the comments of Pope Francis on “clericalism”: *“it is a thorn, it is a scourge, it is a form of worldliness that defiles and damages the face of the Lord’s bride (the Church); it enslaves the holy, faithful people of God”*. These words of Pope Francis quoted by Daniel P. Horan, in the feature series “Synod on Synodality” can be a shock to the system! The Holy Father wants us – priests, deacons, religious and laity – to see ourselves as a ‘pilgrim people’. The ordained are part of the “baptised” and not apart from it!

Looking at the parable of the 5 wise and 5 foolish virgins waiting for the bridegroom in the Gospel for the 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday speaks to our situation in the Church today. The bridegroom is of course Jesus Himself: to be wise is to wait for Him, to listen to Him, to let Him lead us into the Kingdom of Heaven. The great women of the Church, beginning with Mary, His Mother, stood close to Him. With her we will find our place, our part in the mission of the Church.

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